

# Back to work, on a mission

Retirees are tackling social problems

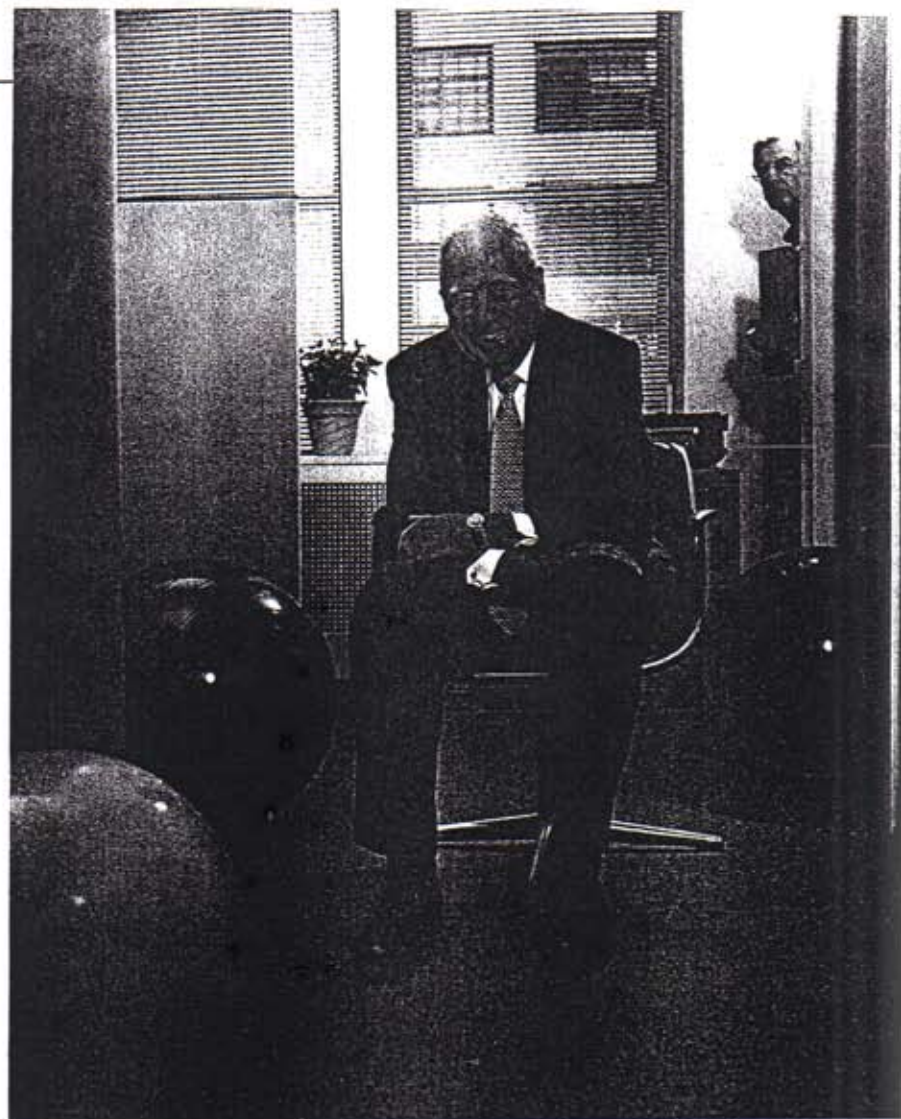
BY JOSEPH P. SHAPIRO

Whom do retirees most want to emulate? A famous golfer or a silver-haired movie star? No, says a 1999 poll for Civic Ventures, an organization that promotes volunteerism. The top role model for seniors was Jimmy Carter, 76, who has spent his post-presidency as a writer, diplomat, and leader of home-building projects for the needy. In growing numbers, retirees are taking his example to heart by starting volunteer organizations that aim to make a difference to society.

Call them the new social entrepreneurs. "We see this as a further stage in our lives where we use the knowledge, experience, and contacts that we have accumulated to address these issues," says Chet Safian, 67, a semiretired investment banker. He's active in Princeton Project 55, which has placed nearly 100 Princeton University graduates this year in public-service jobs.

**Second acts.** One tends to think of tackling social problems as a young person's game, led by people like Wendy Kopp, who at age 22 started Teach for America to recruit young teachers to inner-city schools. But now it's the turn of retirees, says Marc Freedman of Civic Ventures, who wrote about the phenomenon in his recent book, *Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America*. Many idealistic retirees did volunteer work earlier in life. Now they have the time—and, often, the money—to do more. Since 1995, volunteerism has increased faster among older Americans than any other age group except 35-to-44-year-olds, according to Independent Sector, which studies community service. Says Freedman: "They are turning on its head F. Scott Fitzgerald's old edict that there are no second acts in American lives."

For many of these "venture catalysts," as Safian calls them,



Retired lawyer Warren Sinsheimer founded Legal Services for Children in New York City. ● "Turning on its head [the] edict that there are no second acts in American lives"

social entrepreneurship means applying their professional skills in a new setting. Warren Sinsheimer, 74, retired from a Manhattan law firm and then started a legal service for poor children. Bill Schwartz, 70, a retired California internist, opened two free medical clinics—including one just last month—run by other retired doctors. In Washington, D.C., Andy Johnson, 62, a retired Drug Enforcement Administration agent, enlisted other ex-cops in an Experience Corps project to mentor public school students. It's a natural sequel to his career, he says. "I see po-

lice work almost as social work."

To really make a difference takes dedication—and often working almost as hard as when you earned a paycheck. Sinsheimer, who had also been in business and even took a spin in politics, raised money and started Legal Services for Children in December 1999. It is run by a few paid staff members but relies on 13 volunteer older attorneys. One recent morning, he hears stories from a stream of help seekers. He agrees to represent a bright 8-year-old who has been kicked out of his school and sent to one for emotionally disturbed kids.

A ceiling tile is missing, and Sinsheimer's desk is second-hand. On a table lies a contract for renovations on his vacation home on Martha's Vineyard. Wouldn't he rather give up the 40-hour-a-week grind and relax by the ocean? A smile creeps over his face. No, there's nothing he'd rather do in what he calls "the third half of my life." ●

## Service by seniors

Roughly half of all people over 55 do some volunteer work, according to Independent Sector, and the fraction is increasing. The average weekly commitment is 3.3 hours, but 18 percent devote 5 hours or more.

## Senior volunteers

By age group, for 1999

55-64	11.9 mil.
65-74	8.5 mil.
75 and older	7.1 mil.

Source: Independent Sector